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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: MUBARAK IN ITALY: GREATER MIDDLE EAST INITIATIVE
AT CENTER OF DISCUSSIONS

REF: FBIS EUR20040305000019

Classified By: POL MINCOUNS THOMAS COUNTRYMAN, REASONS 1.5 (b) & (d)

1. (C) Summary: The Italian PM and President urged Mubarak to take a more open stance towards the Greater Middle East Initiative, noting Italy's support and the likely endorsement of the EU and NATO for the concept. Mubarak was careful not to rule out Arab participation in the initiative, but argued that Egypt, Iraq and other Arab states would elect extremist governments if they moved too rapidly to democratic elections. Mubarak also linked the success of any initiative to a prior resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli dispute, and spoke of only limited hopes for a breakthrough in the peace process. END SUMMARY

2. (U) Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak visited Rome March 4-5. He met Prime Minister Berlusconi and FM Frattini for dinner Thursday, then met with President Ciampi and MFA U/S Mantica on Friday. Press coverage was limited, overshadowed by the same-day visit of UK PM Blair. Mubarak gave an interview to daily La Repubblica (FBIS reftel), in which he struck many of the same themes as in his private meetings. The Italian government official statement following the visit is contained in para 11 below.

3. (C) According to Berlusconi's deputy diplomatic advisor, Francesco Talo, Mubarak was talkative and frank during his dinner with the PM. Talo said that Mubarak came in a skeptical mood on the GME initiative and the Peace Process, but seemed to relax as he listened to Berlusconi. The PM told Mubarak that Italy shares the US determination to make the GME initiative into an inclusive, bottom-up process. Neither the US nor Europe want to dictate reform from outside, nor to impose a single model on such a diverse group of countries. Most importantly, nobody wants to sideline the peace process.

4. (C) Mubarak told Berlusconi that Egypt, like other Arab countries, faces a difficult situation from domestic public opinion. For Egypt, Iraq or other countries to move immediately to completely open elections would only result in an extremist government coming to power. Mubarak said he wanted the Arab League to address the issue at its summit this month, but that he was willing to discuss the initiative with the US and Europe. Talo said Mubarak left the impression he was definitely "not closed" to the US initiative.

5. (C) Frattini then elaborated on the speech he had given at NATO the previous day on a political role for NATO in the Middle East. He described NATO's Euro-Med Dialogue as one contribution to the broader GME initiative. Mubarak listened with interest and with positive words about the Euro-Med process.

6. (C) On the peace process, Mubarak said there were only a few hopeful signs. Sharon's willingness to pull out of Gaza was positive and may lead to Israel taking additional forward steps under the Roadmap. Mubarak said he would discuss, during his Washington visit later this month, how to get Israel to do more. Berlusconi replied that we need BOTH sides to take more steps under the Roadmap. There was no discussion of a new European or Arab initiative on the peace process.

7. (C) There was a true meeting of the minds on Libya. Both leaders agreed that Libya's recent steps were positive, and that Italy and Egypt deserved the greatest credit for softening up Qadhafi. They then got a few laughs from swapping stories of their meetings with that wacky Qadhafi.

8. (C) President Ciampi's deputy dip advisor, Giuseppe Peroni, gave POLMC a similar readout of the Ciampi meeting. Mubarak started with absolutes: no reform without the involvement of the Arabs themselves, and no reform with the Palestinian issue still unresolved. Mubarak listed reforms in education and human rights already undertaken by Egypt and said he doesn't need outside advice. Fundamentalism is a great risk for Egypt, and would be exacerbated if extremists could claim that the Egyptian government was bowing to foreign pressure. In reply, Ciampi noted that he had spoken of the need for democratic and economic reform in every one of his state visits to Arab countries (Tunisia, Morocco,

Algeria) in the last year. He agreed that there could be no permanent stability in the region until the Palestinian issue was resolved. Peroni said that Mubarak had not been terribly aggressive or closed-minded in discussing the GME.

19. (C) On the peace process, Mubarak was more skeptical than optimistic, though he said the same positive words about a potential withdrawal from Gaza. He went on at length about the important role played by Arafat and claimed that Arafat is fully supporting Abu Alaa.

110. (C) The same day that Mubarak was in Rome, Italian Senate President Marcello Pera gave Ambassador Sembler a readout of his just-completed visit to Cairo. (Prior to his trip, Pera had solicited from the Ambassador points to use to persuade Mubarak on the GME). Pera said his scheduled twenty-minute visit with Mubarak March 3 went on for 55 minutes (leaving Javier Solana to wait outside). Mubarak again made the point to Pera that free elections would only cause terrorists and fundamentalists to come to power. He wanted the US to be more specific about its GME proposal, and not seek to impose it on the Arab world. Pera said he gave Mubarak a copy of President Bush's November speech, saying it was clear that the US was not seeking to impose anything. Mubarak said the mood in Egypt today is very anti-American (Pera told the Ambassador he felt the same after his meetings in Cairo). Mubarak said he is interested in the initiative, but fears the consequences of its current direction. The US should take a step back, and allow the Arabs themselves to be the protagonists in reform. Pera pressed Mubarak to keep the door open on the initiative, and seek to shape it by engaging now on its content. To the Ambassador, Pera commented that Mubarak is one of the Arab world's most pragmatic leaders, and his concern about the GME initiative undermining regional stability should at least be taken into account.

111. (U) ABRIDGED TRANSLATION OF ITALIAN GOVERNMENT STATEMENT: During the long and cordial conversation, Mubarak illustrated Egypt's assessment of the situation in the Middle East. He expressed the hope in a strong European action to promote the resumption of dialogue between Israel and the Palestinian Authority and, expressing concern with the deteriorating economic conditions in the territories, hope, together with Berlusconi, in innovative proposals from both sides. Berlusconi, underscoring the importance of Egypt's role in searching for a solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict, agreed on the importance of relaunching the Palestinian economy and confirmed Italy's commitment, both within the EU and the G8, for a Plan for Palestinian Economic Reconstruction. He underscored the importance of promoting a reform process to modernize and develop countries in the "Greater Middle East", noting that this process must use to advantage those process that have already been promoted with the EU's involvement, such as the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. Berlusconi agreed with Mubarak that all developments in this sector must directly involve the countries that are involved in this process. Both Mubarak and Berlusconi believe the solution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is crucial to the security and stability of the entire region. In conclusion, both Berlusconi and Mubarak expressed their mutual satisfaction with the excellent progress of Italo-Egyptian economic and trade relations and stated their wish to consolidate and enhance those relations further.
END TEXT
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